UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2024 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

https://archive.org/details/bib292735

What occurs in the world touches me. Immediate episodes and events from my past, that are somewhat connected with a present event, become more vivid, sensitive, somehow connected with this present event, so that it becomes more touchable, palpable as if it would be occuring right now.

When the New York Times published the story and events of October 11, 2001 at the World Trade Center catastrophe, it did not touch me so much as the story of young Jewish girls from Stern College, doing the watchful gaze over the dead bodies, or the pieces that would be of dead Jews.

Many tragic events, with miracles occured to me, but the story that Jewish girls watch over Jewish dead bodies was unusual and heavenly. Immediately my Pandora box of memory, flicked and openend up, recalling my history with dead Jewish bodies.

In my home town, Lwov, Poland, I was exposed to notices of births and deaths. Ladies got married, and had children. This was the talk of the town. Notices of death occurences were plentiful. On every corner notices of death occurences, and when the burial will occur, were posted. The familiar half-page of white paper with the black frame was everywhere. The notices changed rapidly, not in form but in content. I was exposed to the dead and wounded lying on the street of my town of birth, when I was about six or seven years old in 1926.

I saw them, those policemen on horses with swords cutting, wounding, killing we Jews. Blood, moaning, crying saturated the air.

Jewish workers paraded on the First of May, every year, expressing their dissatisfaction with the exploitations. They, the workers, became the victims of these barbaric onslaughts.

My father, a worker, often participated in those classic, unruly parades. Our household was saturated with political discussions against anti-Semitism and denigration of workers.

On a particular Sunday, there was more violence than usual and more victims needed our attention. Then my mother, fearful for her sister, my aunt who lived a great distance from us, decided to reach her, to find out what might have occured to them.

Our linens were cut into bandages rolled up. She put them into a wooden basket and gave them to me, the seven-year old boy to carry. She, my mother, took the rolling pin with which we made our festive bread, into her right hand. Assuming a menacing position with the rolling pin, she screamed out, loud and clear, "Bij Zyda"--"Kill the Jews" had become her slogan in trying to reach her sister who lived on the outskirts of our town.

I, a little, undernourished boy, only seven years old, walked with her, often running or marching. God forbid to show some tears, or to object. Often we stopped, seeing a wounded one bleeding, bandaged his wounds, never stopping the scream "Bij Zyda". Wounded people, corpses on the street, screams and running everywhere. Finally we reached our aunt and things cooled down.

My memory of those events remained with me, reopening again and again when similar cruel events occured. Satisfied by the good work done, I felt the spirit of the dead bodies that slowly, by levitation, were gone to Heaven, with my Shma Yisrael on my lips. Dead bodies, wounded humans became my pals. I felt it, as a sensitive little boy.

Soon the Sabbath came and the ugliness, and cruelty was pushed aside. Singing, praying, we blessed the new week, the Sabbath that was coming. Very often for Mincha (morning) of Sabbath

I went with my Grandfather to the Grand Rabbi, the Saint, for a meal and a blessing.

The atmosphere in this sztibel (house), with the chasidim dressed for the great holiday, the Sabbath, was permeated with thoughts and feelings, even smells that intoxicated you, carried you away from the death, blood, open wounds, cries and unhappiness. When the Rabbi blessed you and you said the motzi, the blessing on the piece of bread given by the Rabbi, you really felt blessed. The presence of my Grandfather right there, next to me, embracing me, I felt strong, positive, optimistic -- a physical and spiritual giant.

When my Grandfather died, they said that he was one hundred years old. My family, my mother and all the aunts decided that I, the seven-year old timid but disciplined little boy, should participate fully in the Tahara, that is, the ritual cleansing of the dead body of my beloved Grandfather. Why? It created an argument but my aunts prevailed--I should participate, be there in all the ritual of preparing the dead body to Heaven, to enable the soul, clean and washed body to the gate of Heaven and open the gate with the olive branch of peace.

And so, I was there with my beloved dead Grandfather. With a clean towel, immersed in hot water I washed the body, lifting carefully the hands and feet. Then I helped to cut short the nails of both hands and feet. Suddenly feces started to flow out from the rectum. I was encouraged by the helping male attendants to clean the rectum from residual feces. With my small hands I obediently did so. There was no disgust, no smell, no faint feeling--it was my duty. Then a piece of bone appeared in my hand. They said this was the bone from the herring that my Grandfather ate before he died. I should keep

it and cherish it.

I felt very important, full of power, protected against all the evil. Sewing the tachrichim with my small hands, holding the needle, stitching the linen together in silence, I felt the spirit of my Grandfather. I was sure that he was clean to go to Heaven and watch over me on this earth.

About fifteen years later, events occur, with dead humans, Jews and their burial rituals.

I worked in a commercial office which investigated credits from banks. The financial investigations were expensive and time consuming. When many banks or credit givers inquired about a customer I was able to satisfy many customers with just one investigation just by keeping a good archive and sending out copies of this one report. I kept these archives in perfect order, being familiar with all the minor and large businesses in my town.

The Jewish Kahal government that always voted Socialist or Communist, left the ritual burial and marriage rituals in the hands of the ultra-Orthodox Jews. When a Jew died, he had to be buried the same day. The special rush was on Fridays, to be buried before the Holy Sabbath. The orthodox burial society needed emergency help on Fridays when the regular investigator was over-worked. I was offered this emergency job, being familiar with the necessary economical facts which I kept in my archive about each individual business.

This was extra income for me. I went to the address of the deceased, spoke to the superintendent, neighbors, looked into the store of the deceased's business. Evaluated the goods and inquired about the real esate holdings. Often went down to the official real estate record keeping office to inquire about the real estate loans on the property held by the deceased.

I telephoned immediately to the burial office, giving a succint evaluation of the finances of the deceased. The burial office then knew at once how much to squeeze for donation before the burial.

The dead and the wounded did not leave me so easily. Survived the front line as an active soldier in the Russian Army, confronting the Germans. Then ended up in the gulags of Siberia where the people died from exposure and disease, from typhus and hunger, not counting the weather which was below 40°.

Every morning in the camps of the gulags four to five inmates died next to me. For a Jewish dead inmate I had my Shma and two small stones to cover his eyelids and a branch into his right hand to open the gate to Heaven. I was lucky to escape from this death camp and ended up in a farm in the state of Kazhakstan.

Twenty years had passed since my first exposure to the dying, dead and wounded with all its horrors. I learned something by doing, not by studying or just hearing empty words. You never know when again you will be exposed to similar situations and will use what you learned in new situations even many decades later.

On this farm I worked hard to earn a living, not to be hungry. One night the knocking at the doors was rather persistent. At the entrance were two young blond girls, crying and trying to explain themselves. "We are refugees from Moscva,with our father and mother. Our father just died and we don't know what to do. You are the only Jew on this farm, please do something for our beloved father".

I went to their place during the night. The body was already stiff. We transported the body to the barn, put the body on two wooden horses and the routine of the Tahara which I did for my Grandfather became very vivid. With a linen towel the body was washed, nails cut short. Two small stones were put on both closed eyelids. A small branch was put into the right hand. Covered the body with linen, holding it together with large stitches. Then I said the Shma very loudly. Explained to the young girls the meaning of tachrichim and of the branch which would open the gate of Heaven.

Looking at the two young girls and their mother, I saw so much happiness in their eyes even though a tragedy had occured.

Those two beautiful beatic faces kept haunting me for a long time, thinking about the miraculous coincidences of me learning at the age of seven to take care of the saintly dead and at age 25 how to take care of a dead Jew on a farm in Russia, deep in the South among all the Mongols.

Dr Joseph Heller
900 West 190 Street
New York NY 10040